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ABSTRACT

Successful approaches to a more theatrical classroom performance of literature initially depend on a student performer's critical ability to analyze literature and the creative ability to ultimately give voice and body to a literary character. An imaginative Reader's Theater classroom exercises blueprint is also an essential ingredient in promoting a student performer's ability to read literature with a critical eye and to understand the potential role that a theatrical impulse might play in capturing the subtle nuance of a literary character's intention or motivation. The active extent to which supplementary exercises may be used to promote a more theatrical impulse in classroom performance is the true measure of cultivating student skills in role-playing literary characters. (Contains 10 references. Three different exercises--"X Files"; "The Body Shop"; and "You Are There" are attached; exercises contain sections on objective, approach, and extension.) (NKA)

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"Reader's Theatre: A ' Theatrical Impulse ' in the Classroom Performance of Literature"

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"Reader's Theatre: A ' Theatrical Impulse ' in the Classroom Performance of Literature"

The theatrical impulse in Reader's Theatre is interested in pursuing the artistic and dramatic visualization of the actions, attitudes, and emotions of literary characters in classroom performance of literature. The Reader's Theatre theatrical impulse is also the same one shared with traditional theatre practice in terms of the focus on a written text, attention to pictorial composition, vocal and physical techniques that capture a three-dimensional character portrait, and the cultivation of an informed audience response to text, performance, and production.

Reader's Theatre literary characters do not leap from the printed page full-blown in a detailed description of their performance intention or motivátion. They emerge in infinitely subtle and frequently disguised classroom rehearsal clues that point the way to striking elements of character development generally found in traditional theatre approaches to role-playing. The classroom performance challenge is to seize these theatrical role-playing opportunities revealed in rehearsal and to flesh-out the tentative or incomplete literary character outline with as much inventive self-expression as possible.

The current theatrical trend in Reader's Theatre signals unlimited artistic possibilities for continued experimentation in classroom performance of literature. Discovering the theatrical impulse in literature gives heightened dramatic meaning to a literary text and personalizes student performances. It also suggests the need to pursue an "illustrative" approach in the interpretation of literary texts; giving theatrical life and meaning to the

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description, dialogue, and images associated with literary characterization.

Exercise Blueprint

The following exercises developed in an introduction to literature class for non-majors should provide meaningful instructional opportunities to help stimulate further exploration of the theatrical impulse in classroom performance of literature. Each instructor should approach the selected exercises in a manner that is comfortable and yet compatible with an individual style of instruction. Each instructor is encouraged to take the creative liberty of adjusting, extending, or modifying the basic classroom performance techniques suggested to meet special assignment needs. The exercises are framed as participatory activities to promote awareness of the principles at work in clearly delineating a literary character in classroom performance.

There are a number of excellent resource texts that incorporate the theatrical impulse as an integral part of classroom performance of literature. The practical as well as the theoretical approaches to a more theatrical classroom performance of literature may be found in the following texts: Stern and Henderson (1993), Adler (1988), Pelias (1992), Crafton(1989), Ratliff (1999), Lee and Gura (1992), Lance (1991), Laughlin (1990), and Machlin(1990). These supporting texts and the exercises that follow promote a decidedly "risk-free" classroom atmosphere that encourages student performers to pursue more individual and personal styles of voicing literary characters in classroom performance of literature.

The rehearsal period is still the most appropriate time and place to translate these

exercises into an inventive performance blueprint. Particular attention should be given to the "choices" made in the rehearsal period to achieve the specific objective of each exercise. Finally, practice economy and efficiency with the exercises during the rehearsal period. Concentrate on a single performance objective and a selective character portrait most appropriate to the sample literature, rather than striving for a more complex character portrait that may be detailed in the complete literary text.

(Please see appended exercises)

Summary

Successful approaches to a more theatrical classroom performance of literature initially depend on a student performer's critical ability to analyze literature and the creative ability to ultimately give voice and body to a literary character. An imaginative Reader's Theatre classroom exercises blueprint is also an essential ingredient in promoting a student performer's ability to read literature with a critical eye; and to understand the potential role that a theatrical impulse might play in capturing the subtle nuance of a literary character's intention or motivation. The active extent to which supplementary exercises may be used to promote a more theatrical impulse in classroom performance is the true measure of cultivating student skills in role-playing literary characters.

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Exercise 1: X Files: Three Characters in Search of an Alien Author

Objective: To acquaint performers with the role that critical analysis plays in classroom performance.

Approach: Begin the exercise with a critical analysis of a selected literary text featuring three characters and an author's persona. The analysis should be sufficiently detailed to indicate character relationships and the author's apparent point of view or theme. The literary text should also be cut or edited to a fifteen minute classroom performance.

In the first part of the exercise, place several chairs and tables or desks in different areas of the playing space. Prepare four written slips of paper that read "author" and the individual names of each "character" named in the selected literature. Each performer draws a folded slip of paper, moves to a table or desk and sits. No performer is permitted to know the identity of any other performer at this time. Performers may move to different locations and join other characters at tables or desks as the exercise moves forward.

Ask a member of the audience to choose an exciting event or incident in the literary text that may stimulate the initial discussion. Each performer then responds to the question in the voice of the author, narrator, and characters--without revealing their identity. The object of the exercise is to rely solely on the literary text, and to direct responses to the implicit or explicit evidence suggested in the literature. Any disagreements in interpretation should be resolved with a reference to character action, dialogue, or narration.

There should also be an impartial moderator, or Narrator figure, who solicits questions from the audience to clarify the performer's interpretation of the literary text. Questions may be directed to a character's intention or motivation, author's point of view, theme, imagery, and choice of locale or setting. Questions may also be directed to performance approaches, staging techniques, or movement patterns that might be useful in visualizing the literary text.

It is important in the question part of the exercise that performers recognize each other's identity without any acknowledgement to the audience. It is also Important that performers respond to questions within the context of what a critical analysis of the literature suggests. The exercise ends when the moderator determines, at periodic intervals, that a majority of the audience clearly identifies the "author." Finally, each performer reveals the role they have played in the exercise.

Extension: Extend the exercise with other performers in small-groups assigned different literary texts for analysis and audience questions. Or, use the responses to audience questions as an improvisation to flesh-out character relationships.

clarify apparent author point of view, and determine a production metaphor for classroom performance.

Some good examples of literature that lends itself to analysis, audience questions, and improvisation in a limited time frame may include the "young King Arthur's education" excerpt in T. H. White's The Sword in the Stone, the "tea party" episode in Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland, and the insurance money quarrel" scene in Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun II, i).

Exercise 2: The Body Shop

Objective: To promote performer awareness of fluid, expressive body movement in classroom performance.

Approach: Working in ensemble groups of six or eight, begin with a series of relaxing warm-up exercises. Performers bend from the waist, trying to touch their toes and then relax the arms in front of the feet. Slowly, performers swing both the head and the arms in a pendulum-like motion--like a limp noodle in a pot of boiling water. The swinging motion continues with the legs and chest cavity until performers collapse in a soggy heap in the middle of the playing space.

In the second part of the exercise, the performers lie flat on their back and slightly elevate the knees, while keeping the feet flat on the floor. The pelvis should be tilted toward the knees, and the arms relaxed at the side flat on the floor. Performers inhale deeply for a count of thirty-five, then exhale slowly for a count of thirty-five.

When completely relaxed, performers purr like a playful kitten and sustain the sound produced for a count of thirty-five. Keeping the pelvis titled toward the knees, performers continue to inhale deeply and then exhale slowly for a count of thirty-five as they growl like a dog, hum like a song bird, snort like a horse, buzz like a bee, whimper like an infant, hiss like a snake, hoot like an owl, and crow like a rooster.

Finally, the relaxed performers stand and respond as an ensemble to the following movement patterns. First, move like the witches casting an evil spell in Ben Jonson's short poem "Witches' Chasm." Second, move like infantrymen approaching an enemy outpost in Norman Mailer's The Armies of the Night. Third, move like the lost travelers in Edna St. Vincent Vincent Millay's "The Snow Storm." Fourth, move like the aged professor delivering a lecture in Eugene Ionesco's The Lesson. Fifth, move like the clowns and jugglers in Thomas Wolfe's "Circus at Dawn."

Extension: The exercise may be extended to include taped music that promotes spontaneous movement patters. If taped music is used, allow one-minute between each musical selection. There are also opportunities in the extended part of the exercise to distribute excerpts of literature like Alberto Rios' "Wet Camp," William Sydney Porter's (O.Henry) "The Gift of the Magi," or Stephen Crane's " In the Desert" that lend themselves to small-group choreographed movement.

Exercise 3. You Are There

Objective: To acquaint performers with the role of historical research in role-playing.

Approach: Divide performers into small-groups of five, and distribute a poetry or prose selection that suggests a specific historical period. Performers are instructed to search outside the literature to learn about predominant attitudes, social mores, daily habits, and dress of the selected period.

The historical research should focus on examples of customs and manners that reflect another time and another place. The studies should also complement an anlysis of the historical description in the selected literature. In a study of Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales, for example, performers may focus on the daily routine of a feudal estate, appropriate choice of clothes to suggest a character's social status, or experiment with voicing unfamiliar phrases like "smale foweles" or "up roos the sonne."

The second part of the exercise is classroom performance of the literature that includes historical research in role-playing. Performers should integrate daily routines, dress or habits, mannerisms, and historical traits that capture the spirit of the times. There should also be some attention paid to the use of historical props, set pieces, or small scenic units in the staging of the literature for classroom performance.

Extension: The exercise may be extended to include interdisciplinary approaches to historical research as well. For example, alliances with art, music, social studies and history can result in "You Are There" projects that recreate selected historical periods in classroom performance. Participants may contribute authentic music, scenic art, case studies, informative hand-outs, and inventive staging to the collaborative project.

There are a number of literary texts, in addition to Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales, that lend themselves to interdisciplinary projects. The epic narratives of Jonathan Swift's Gulliver's Travels or James Joyce's Ulysses are familiar historical travelogues; and there are popular Arthurian legends like Alfred Lord Tennyson's "Idylls of the King" or Mark Twain's satirical A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.

Some other literary texts that feature historical customs and manners may include Charles Dickens The Pickwick Papers, Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre, Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio and George Bernard Shaw's Androcles and the Lion. There are also good adventure narratives like Daniel DeFoe's Foe's Moll Flanders, Henry Fielding's Tom Jones, and Herman Melville's Billy Budd that are likely prospects for interdisciplinary classroom collaboration.